

Treachery

The ravens that circled above the far ridge were the first warning. Wherever these scavenger birds gathered, there was death. The birds had likely been drawn to the valley beyond the ridge by a dead deer or some other forest creature that had perished in the cold. It had been a hard winter after all, but Griff Connah knew that men had a way of dying in the forests of Gwynedd at any time of year. A day ago, they had left a score of their men camped in the valley beyond the ridge where the carrion birds circled. And ravens would feast on dead men as happily as dead game.

He scanned the ridgeline, searching for any hint of trouble, but saw none. He glanced at the rider to his left. His companion was a striking young man, handsome after a fashion—or at least the women seemed to find him so. He was a big man with a russet beard and sat his horse with an easy grace. Even after a long day in the saddle, he rode erect, like the prince that he was, a thick mane of brown hair whipping behind him in the freezing wind. He was Llywelyn ap Iowerth, rebel leader and one day, God willing, Prince of Gwynedd.

They were returning from a parlay with Llywelyn's uncle, Daffyd ap Owain, the man Llywelyn had been in rebellion against for seven long years. Lord Daffyd had ruled Gwynedd east of the River Conwy for twenty years, but had been unable to snuff out Llywelyn's growing strength in the backcountry. The invitation to talk had come from Lord Roderic, Llywelyn's other uncle and Daffyd's younger brother. Roderic, who ruled Gwynedd west of the Conwy had offered to serve as intermediary between the warring parties and had pledged hostages to guarantee the safety of both men.

Now the talking was done and the hostages returned. Like all land east of the river, the land they now rode through was claimed by Daffyd, though the wilder parts of Gwynedd were under no firm control. And whatever peaceful overtures had been made at the talks, the bloody civil war was far from over. He saw that Llywelyn's eyes were also fixed above the ridgeline ahead. He had seen the birds too.

It was probably a dead animal—nothing more, but they had not survived seven years as rebels in this wilderness by ignoring warning signs. The prince edged his mount close to Griff.

“See anything?” he called, just loud enough to be heard over the horses' hooves. No one in Wales had keener eyes than Griff Connah.

“Just the ravens.”

“Worried?” Llywelyn asked.

“Always.”

Griff had been with Llywelyn since shortly after the young nobleman arrived in Gwynedd at the age of fourteen to claim his share of an illustrious, and dangerous, inheritance. The boy's grandfather, Owain, Prince of Gwynedd, had been the ruler of this region of northern Wales for over thirty years, controlling much of the rest of the country as overlord to lesser princes. The old man had seven acknowledged sons, Llywelyn's father, Iowerth, being the second oldest. He also sired countless bastards and died without officially naming an heir. It was a failure that would drench his patrimony in blood across two generations.

The killing began within months of the old Prince's death. Daffyd and Roderic, sons of Owain's second wife, killed Hywel, Owain's oldest son, in battle. They would surely have done

the same to Llywelyn's father, Iowerth, who was next in line of seniority, had he not retreated to his fortress at Dolwyddelan, deep in the towering peaks of Eryri.

There he stayed, far from the intrigues of his half-brothers, and there he sired a son, Llywelyn. But the fortress proved no refuge for Iowerth, or his family. In a calamity for his line, Iowerth died of a fever, leaving only his wife and infant son to face the ambitions of Daffyd and Roderic. The wife was no fool. She fled east to Powys, the land of her kinsmen, and raised Llywelyn there, safe from the boy's ruthless uncles.

While Daffyd and Roderic split Gwynedd between them, Llywelyn lived as an exile in Powys. There, the boy was raised to understand his noble heritage and to hate the men who had stolen it from him. For, by right of primogeniture, Llywelyn had a legitimate claim to the rule of all Gwynedd. His line, through Iowerth back to Owain, was senior to that of the brothers Daffyd and Roderic, but in the brutal world of northern Wales, rules of succession bought the boy little.

As he grew older, Llywelyn chafed in exile and dreamed of glory. When he was fourteen, he gathered a small band of maternal cousins and, against his mother's entreaties, rode west into the land of his father to claim his inheritance. He was not warmly received.

Llywelyn had been hunted relentlessly for months by his uncle Daffyd when he stumbled wet and exhausted into Griff Connah's village. He had only one man with him, his cousins having fled back into Powys. The young noble's cause seemed hopeless, but Griff had seen something in the gangly boy, a burning intensity in his eyes, that had drawn him to this royal pretender.

Connah became one of Llywelyn's first adherents and, in the hard years that followed, rose to become the rebel prince's most trusted lieutenant. He was tall and lean, with heavily muscled shoulders that marked him as a bowman. He commanded the archers of the small but growing rebel army that had come to dominate the wilder tracts of land east of the Conwy River—the part of Gwynedd claimed by Daffyd.

In the past year, Daffyd's forces had retreated to the coastal plain, leaving the hinterland to his nephew. Llywelyn used his light cavalry and archers to control the narrow roads and forested hills inland, but dislodging Daffyd from the richer lands on the coast had proven to be another matter. Llywelyn had neither the force to assault nor lay siege to the string of fortresses that protected the lowlands.

And so there had been stalemate.

The first snows brought an end to the seventh year of campaigning and both sides settled into winter quarters. Then the unexpected offer of parlay arrived during Christ's Mass. Surprisingly, the message had come not from Daffyd, but from Roderic. The messenger said that Daffyd was ready to recognize Llywelyn's claim to some part of Owain's old domains and had enlisted Roderic as a go-between. Roderic had agreed to arrange a meeting between his brother and his nephew and guaranteed the safety of both men.

The meeting would be held in an open field on the eastern bank of the River Conwy, a few miles upstream from the castle at Deganwy. This was Daffyd's land and his men garrisoned the castle, but Roderic had substantial forces just across the river and had promised to provide hostages to insure there would be no treachery on either side.

"Why would Daffyd offer a deal now?" Griff asked after the messenger had left their camp. "I don't like it."

Llywelyn shrugged.

“Perhaps he grows weary of the fight. He’s no longer young and I hear he’s grown fat. He knows we are winning.”

Griff gave a quiet hoot.

“Your uncle is feasting before a roaring fire this Christ Mass, snug in his fortress at Rhuddlan, while we huddle in these timber huts against the cold. I’m not sure it looks like we are winning.”

Llywelyn laughed and shook his head.

“True enough. Perhaps he will offer me half of his lands and name me his heir so he can live out his life in peace.”

Griff shook his head.

“I don’t think his son, Owain, would appreciate that!”

Llywelyn laughed again.

“No, I suppose not. Owain bears my grandfather’s famous name and I hear he harbours ambitions to one day rule himself. Alas, he has not the brains or the balls to do so.”

The two grew quiet for a long moment watching the snow fall around the primitive hill fort that was their winter quarters. Finally, Griff spoke.

“So, my lord, in the unlikely event Daffyd should offer you half of his land now and all upon his death—in return for peace—would you accept?”

Llywelyn grinned and swung his arm in an arc taking in the cold grey woods around them.

“And give up all this, Griff?” He paused and looked at his friend and follower. “Perhaps I would.”

Two weeks later, they made the hard, two-day ride from the hill fort to the edge of the high country that looked down on the coastal plain. Llywelyn left a score of his personal guard behind in a sheltered valley and rode on with only six men, all that either party was allowed to bring to the parlay. As they approached the meeting place, two riders came out to meet them, one of middle years and one a mere boy of no more than six years—though he sat his horse as though born to it.

The older rider greeted Llywelyn.

“My lord, I am Andras, sworn man of Roderic, Prince of Aberffraw and Lord of Anglesey and Eryri. He bids me welcome you to this parlay, which he prays will bring peace to Gwynedd and his own dear family.”

Llywelyn reined in his horse and gave a quick nod to the man.

“We all hope for peace,” he said blandly, then turned to the boy. “What is your name, lad?”

The older man started to speak, but Llywelyn cut him off.

“I’m addressing the boy, not you. Let him answer.”

The boy was fair-haired and a bit wide-eyed, but he spoke up readily enough.

“I am Rhun ap Thomas ap Roderic, my lord,” he announced proudly. “I am your hostage. Are you Llywelyn?”

“*Prince* Llywelyn to you, lad. Roderic is your grandsire?”

“Aye, Llywelyn...Prince Llywelyn. He is my father’s father.”

Llywelyn turned back to the older rider.

“Tell your master the hostage is acceptable.”

The rider turned his horse’s head to go, but Llywelyn spoke again.

“And tell him my man will slit the boy’s throat if there is treachery.”

The messenger gave a grim nod and rode off. Llywelyn pointed to one of his men who rode up next to the boy and took the horse’s reins in his hand. Llywelyn spurred his mount and followed Roderic’s man along with Griff and his four remaining men. The boy watched them go, then turned to his guard.

“Did he mean that? If things go wrong...you’ll kill me?”

The man thought to frighten the lad, but saw the boy was frightened enough already.

“No, lad. No need to fear. Prince Llywelyn does not kill children, but I hope your kin folk don’t know that.”

The boy sat silently contemplating his situation for a bit.

“I hope they don’t either.”